OPIOID DEPENDENCY PROGRAM

Information for Physicians

Prescribed methadone has reliably and consistently been demonstrated as effective in treating opioid dependency. It reduces illicit opioid use, morbidity, criminal activity, unemployment rates, HIV sero-prevalence and risk behaviour, and deaths from overdose.

AADAC offers methadone maintenance treatment through its Opioid Dependency Program, with clinics located in Edmonton and Calgary. There are opportunities for primary care physicians to learn more about this treatment and to become involved in the continuum of care.

Physical dependence versus addiction

Physical dependence is purely a physiological reaction of the body to certain substances such as opioids, characterized by tolerance and withdrawal. Addiction is a condition in which a person continues to use a substance or engage in a behaviour in spite of mounting negative consequences and a progressive reduction in their quality of life. It often includes changes in the brain that are characterized by the patient's inability to maintain control. Methadone maintenance treatment is effective in helping people who are addicted to opioids.

Why methadone?

Methadone has a very long half-life. Tolerance to methadone develops very slowly and it has minimal side effects. Methadone has a high affinity to the opioid receptors in the brain. Prescribed in adequate doses, it prevents the "high" when other opioids are used. The patient can be maintained on a stable dose for years without significant adverse effects. Methadone has been used in the treatment of opioid dependency for over three decades.

Benefits of methadone maintenance treatment

Patients stabilized on methadone are able to live functional and productive lives. They experience no cravings, drowsiness, or symptoms of withdrawal. Many studies have shown that methadone maintenance treatment has a number of direct benefits to both the patient and the community. These benefits include

- abstinence from or reduced use of intravenous drugs and other drugs
- reduced risk of overdose and death
- decreased risks of contracting or transmitting hepatitis B or C, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, and other infections
- reduced criminal involvement
- increased employment
- improved family stability
- improved pregnancy outcomes
- improved overall health

Should patients have the goal of abstinence to be appropriate for methadone treatment?

Absolute abstinence from other drugs is not required. Abstinence is a goal that is strived for, but methadone maintenance is continued as long as the patient is benefiting from the treatment.

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What is the proper dose of methadone?

The dose required varies with the individual. Methadone initiation, maintenance and withdrawal are guided by the standards and guidelines provided by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta.

How long do patients remain in treatment?

Patients stay on methadone for as long as they need to. Generally, the longer patients spend in treatment, the greater their chance of success. Patients may voluntarily withdraw from treatment at any time, but they are encouraged to stay in treatment for at least one year. Some may remain on methadone indefinitely. An individual tapering regime is set up if a patient decides to withdraw.

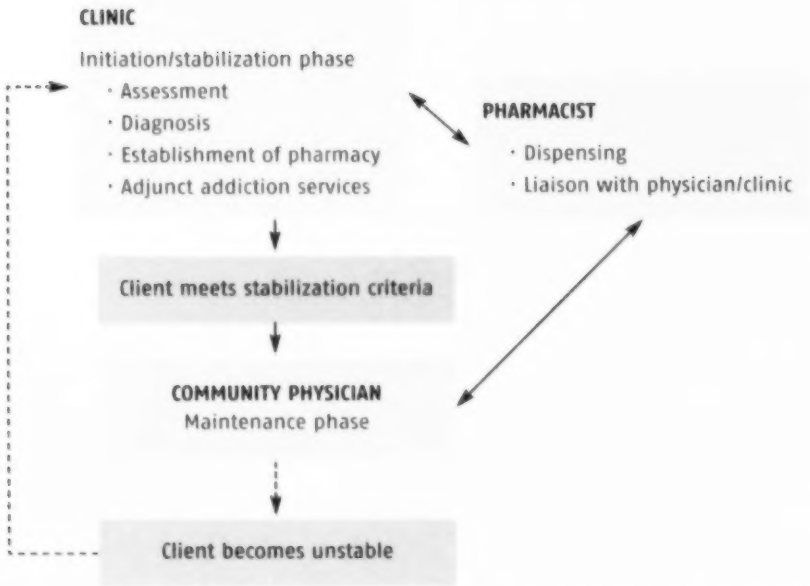
Can patients work and drive while on methadone?

Yes. At the correct dose, methadone does not impair motor skills, mental capacity, or the ability to operate cars or machinery. People on methadone are fully functional.

Alberta's staged-care model for the delivery of MMT

In Alberta, methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) is provided using a staged-care model.

- All patients enter methadone treatment through a specialized clinic providing addiction support and ready access to other health and social services.
- Once fully stabilized, patients are transferred to community-based physicians. At this point, methadone management is integrated into overall health care.
- Patients are referred back to the specialized clinic if re-stabilization is needed.



Adapted from Standards & Guidlines for Maintenance Treatment, College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, December 2005

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AADAC's Opioid Dependency Program

AADAC's Opioid Dependency Program (ODP) provides medication-assisted treatment to people who are opioid dependent and are unable to achieve stable abstinence. When abstinence is not attainable, methadone maintenance can allow people who are addicted to opioid drugs to have balanced and productive lives.

The program provides

- medical and addiction assessments
- stabilization of the patient on the most effective dose of methadone
- counselling
- ongoing support and monitoring (e.g., prescription management, urine testing)
- links to community pharmacists for dosing
- links to other addiction treatment services
- links to other social and health support systems

What does AADAC's ODP offer to Alberta physicians?

Primary care physicians are essential partners in the staged-care model for the delivery of methadone treatment in Alberta. The ODP is willing to work in partnership with interested physicians.

- Physicians can attend ODP clinics as observers to learn more about methadone treatment.
- ODP physicians are willing to provide in-service sessions to medical groups looking for more information.
- The ODP offers individual consultation for physicians who have patients who are opioid dependent.
- Physicians can refer opioid dependent patients to the ODP for treatment. Patients are usually seen at their local AADAC office for screening and referral to the ODP, but physicians can refer directly to the program. Contact the AADAC office in your community or call the ODP clinic nearest you for information. Pregnant women have priority access and should be referred directly to the program.
- The ODP will fully support the transfer of patients from the clinic to primary care physicians and remain available for consultation. Patients can be directly referred back to the program if re-stabilization is required.

Where to get more information

To find out more about opioid addiction or methadone treatment, call the AADAC Opioid Dependency Program nearest you.

Edmonton: 780-422-1302
Calgary: 403-297-5118

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How to reach us

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ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION

For more information, contact your local AADAC office, call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at aadac.com

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ISBN 978-0-7785-6212-2